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SUBJECT: EGYPT: UPDATE ON POLITICAL PARTY DEVELOPMENTS

Classified by ECPO Minister-Counselor Michael Corbin for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The resignation of prominent reform advocate Osama el-Ghazali Harb from the ruling NDP attracted considerable attention in the Egyptian media. In drawing up plans for a new liberal political party, Harb is pursuing what many frustrated Egyptian intellectuals have called for, though there are well-founded doubts about his chances of success. Meanwhile, although the leadership of the Wafd, Egypt's premier opposition party, remains locked in dispute, the leader of the effort to remove party chair No'man Gomaa told us he was confident that victory was imminent. A new political party, the "Conservatives," has been licensed by the GOE, though a leading commentator denounced the act as symbolic of the government's cynicism and hypocrisy.

Respected Figure Quits the NDP

¶2. (C) On March 8, Shura Council member Osama el-Ghazali Harb, one of Egypt's most prominent liberal intellectuals, announced his resignation from the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in a front-page interview in the prestigious independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm. Harb said that he was resigning because he had become completely disillusioned with the party's professed commitment to transform Egypt into a pluralistic democracy. Harb said he had been enthusiastic when invited to join the party's Policies Committee after it was created at the 2002 Party Congress. The Committee was supposed to lead a major overhaul of the party and ultimately the country and jump start Egypt's glacial movement from authoritarianism to democracy. Ultimately, Harb stated, it has served as nothing more than a platform for presidential son Gamal Mubarak to posture and create a constituency among the public.

A Long Time Coming

¶3. (C) Harb has for some time harbored doubts about the commitment of the NDP's "new guard" to political reform, and voiced these doubts in public. His comments describing the NDP "reform camp" as having no real intent to open the country's political system have appeared frequently in the press in the past six months. In a March 12 meeting, poloff asked him why he had waited until now to resign. Harb replied that he had decided to leave the party after the amendment of Article 76 of the constitution in mid-2005. At first ecstatic, he concluded that the modalities ratified by parliament guaranteed that the NDP would retain its grip on

the presidency, making a mockery of Mubarak's stated goal of a competitive presidential selection process. Harb was the only NDP member in the Shura Council to vote against the amendment.

14. (C) Harb said that he postponed his public resignation in 2005 after being warned by a number of senior and influential NDP and GOE personalities that resigning at that time would be viewed as an unforgivable "stab in the back." In light of these warnings, Harb decided it would be prudent to wait to break with the party until after the 2005 elections were settled. By early 2006, he decided the time was right.

A New Party

15. (C) Harb told poloff of his plans to form a new, liberal political party. Egypt badly needs a party which can offer an alternative to both the corruption and autocracy of the current regime and the anti-modern Islamists, he stated. "Many parties have a respected figure at their head and a person behind the scenes who actually controls things," he told poloff. In the new party (which is not yet named), "I will be the person behind the scenes," while the official party leader will be constitutional law scholar Yahya Gamal. Formerly a high-ranking technocrat in the Sadat regime, Gamal is frequently quoted attacking the Mubarak regime in the Egyptian press and is often seen at rallies organized by the Kifaya ("Enough") protest movement. Though not a household name, Gamal is well-known and highly respected among Egypt's activist, civil society, and academic communities.

16. (C) Asked whether he believed the GOE's Political Parties Committee (PPC), which approves and regulates political parties, was likely to approve a new liberal party, Harb allowed that it would be an uphill battle, but one worth fighting. Asked why forming a new party was preferable to joining forces with an existing one, Harb told poloff that he had been invited by Mahmoud Abaza and Mouneer Abdel Nour to join the Wafd, Egypt's oldest party, which espouses a generally liberal political and economic program. He declined the invitation, he stated, saying that he was discouraged by the inability of the Abaza faction to decisively resolve the leadership dispute with No'man Gomaa.

17. (C) For his part, Abdel Nour subsequently confirmed to poloff that he had lobbied Harb to join the Wafd. Abdel Nour was dismissive of the prospects for Harb's new party. "It is easy to convene a group like minded intellectuals in Cairo," he stated. "It is not easy to build a national infrastructure, with party offices and cadres in all governorates of the country." A national organization is something the Wafd already has and something Harb and his friends will encounter great difficulty in creating, he predicted.

Another Defector

18. (C) In the same mid-March week that saw Harb's resignation from the NDP, Egyptian press took note of an open letter sent to NDP Secretary-General Safwat el-Sherif by Mohammed Allam, a former NDP MP and Assistant Party Chair for the province of Sohag, Upper Egypt. In his letter, Allam wrote "I discovered that all of the talk by the President and his son about 'new thinking' (the NDP's slogan since 2002) was only about changing people, not policies. Allam also attacked Ahmed Ezz, the powerful party membership secretary and Gamal Mubarak confidante for his alleged mismanagement of party affairs. (Comment: Allam's stature cannot be compared to Harb's, but the timing and vociferousness of his resignation nonetheless attracted attention. Some linked his departure to Harb's to make the argument that "all kinds of people," were fed up and quitting the NDP. End comment.)

¶9. (C) Meanwhile, Mouneer Abdel Nour, the influential Christian businessman and son one of the founders of the Wafd in the early 20th century, told poloff on March 13 that the effort to remove No'man Gomaa as party leader was nearing completion. Abdel Nour and ally Mahmoud Abaza, having been leading the effort to depose the unpopular Gomaa. They called the party central board meeting in late January which resulted in a 33-10 vote against Gomaa's continued leadership. However, removing Gomaa proved more difficult than anticipated: The PPC declined to recognize the central board's removal of him, stating that according to the party by-laws, only a full general assembly of the party (comprising about 1100 members) could change the party head. Abdel Nour conceded that the January vote, though symbolic of the party's lack of confidence in Gomaa, technically could not remove him. However, Abdel Nour continued, an extraordinary party General Assembly was convened on February 10 and elected Mahmoud Al-Taweel interim party leader, pending new party leadership elections later in the year.

¶10. (C) Abdel Nour insisted that the Wafd Party rank-and-file was united behind the "Abaza faction" of the party. "We have the party premises, here in Cairo, and in every governorate. We have the newspaper and the bank accounts. Gomaa has part of a district office in Fayyoun, part of a district office in Mansoura, and a piece of paper from 2000 that says he is the party head. He has nothing else," Abdel Nour said with a smirk.

¶11. (C) It is no longer a question of whether but rather when and how the PPC will recognize Gomaa's removal and replacement, he insisted to poloff. Having just come from a meeting with PPC Chairman (and NDP Secretary-General) Safwat el-Sherif, Abdel Nour told poloff the PPC was ready to recognize Gomaa's removal, but that it was important that the procedure be adhered to scrupulously. Abdel Nour added that he had declined Sheriff's offer that the PPC send a letter recognizing the new party leadership, saying that, to avoid likely legal challenges by Gomaa (a former Dean of Cairo University Law School), procedure dictated that the Wafd send a letter to the PPC advising it of the decisions of the General Assembly and that the PPC should then send an acknowledgement of these decisions.

¶12. (C) Comment: Abdel Nour's confidence that the Wafd Party leadership dispute will be settled quickly and decisively is not new. This has been his position since he and Abaza launched their putsch in January. That said we do not doubt his claims that the "Abaza faction" control almost all of the Wafd's physical assets, and the lion's share of party support. End comment.

Conservatives Get the Nod

¶13. (C) Also in mid-March, the PPC approved the license application of the new Conservatives Party, led by the obscure Mustafa Abdel Aziz Hassan. In a summary of their program circulated to the media, the Conservatives emphasized striking a balance between the rights and responsibilities of the citizen and the rights and responsibilities of the state. The statement cautioned against engaging in futile confrontations with the state.

¶14. (C) Magdy Gallad, editor of the independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm published a sarcastic response to the development, openly wondering why the PPC would approve a party which just applied, and has no apparent constituency, while some parties that have real followings, and "real programs" like the nationalist Karama (dignity) Party and the moderate Islamist Wasat (Center) Party have waited years and filed multiple law suits and still been denied approval.

¶15. (C) Comment: The Conservatives Party has all the makings

of another of Egypt's "paper" parties that serve as a platform for an individual or a small clique, but lack the resources, vision, and appeal to attract a significant base of support. End comment.

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